AP Literature & Composition

Poetry Analysis

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As we delve into the analysis of poetry use the following two methods and attached graphic organizer to aide in revealing a poem’s deeper meaning.

**10 Point Analysis**

1. **Literal Scenario**—what is occurring on a literal level? In other words, what situation is being described?

This does not mean that something has to be occurring at the moment, as it may be an event or image from the past. In either case, it is important to have the facts of the poem clear. Are two lovers departing? Is an event being commemorated? Is the agent describing something in the natural world? Is the agency reflecting on a past event? This is the usual sort of information-retrieval reading done with any passage of prose or verse: a *summary* of the situation with key words from the poem (evidence).

1. **Agency**—the agent/agency is the subject(s) of the verbs. Who is the main agent in the poem? Does the main agent change as the poem progresses?
2. **Speech Acts**—when poems are classified by their speech acts, attention is drawn to their *manner of expression* as well as their content.

For example, a speaker can *apologize* for any number of things—tardiness, mistakes or negative remarks—but in every case, the speech act is an *apology*. Since the language of most poems can be thought of as a series of utterances by an agent, the poem expects you to track the agent’s successive speech acts from one to the next, as the change in speech acts often coincides with a poetic shift.

Below is a starter list of example speech acts, do not limit yourself to this list:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| explanation | evaluation | vilification | clarification | valediction |
| declaration | protest | condemnation | resignation | glorification |
| revelation | admonition/reproof | salutation | atonement | canonization |
| apology | admiration | contradiction | celebration | affirmation |

1. **Antecedent Scenario**—what happened before the poem started? What has disturbed the status quo and set the poem in motion?

Although this seems to drift dangerously close to wild speculation outside the boundaries of the text, it is legitimate to infer the antecedent scenario when the poem allows.

For example, if the agent is discussing her father’s passing and spends most of the lines discussing what a tyrant her father was, one can safely assume that the father, while alive, was deemed too harsh by the daughter. This is a way of exploring the larger context of the poem.

1. **Inner Structural Division**—what are the major “movements” in the poem?

Uncovering this requires a division of the poem into larger pieces or movements—the inner structure. In investigating the internal structure of a poem, divide it into parts along its “fault lines”. Where does the major change in tense or speech act take place?

Elements of internal structural form include, but are not limited to:

* Sentences—how many sentences are there in the poem, and how do they relate to one another? What are the length and types of sentences used?
* Person—determine whether the person is first, second, or third. Is the person singular or plural? Note: A change of person as a poem goes along is a significant structuring device.
* Tenses—identify any movement in time through the shift from past to present and/or future.
* Imagery—These words can be all of one sort, such as a collection of names of different flowers, or they can be of different sorts: that is, a series of specific nouns like “flood”, “earthquake”, “fire” and “shipwreck”. This series of words aide to construct the single abstract of “catastrophe”.

It should be noted that the arrangement of these words is always systematic and should be thus identified. Examples are: parallel, contrast or in a ranked hierarchy.

1. **Tone**—the poet’s attitude toward the subject of the poem, this means you must discern the subject of the poem.

Keep in mind the speaker’s attitude toward self, other characters and the subject, as well as attitudes of characters other than the speaker.

What is the progression of the tone? Does it shift? Poems rarely sound a single note, tending to be dynamic rather than static. For example, a poem can move from lugubrious to tentatively hopeful to resigned. Reading the poem aloud will often help distinguish the various tones of voice it exhibits.

1. **Outer Structural Forms**—the outer form refers to meter, rhyme and stanza-form, and sometimes, as in the case of a sonnet, will follow a prescribed pattern. Something that will aide in this process is being able to identify key elements from specific poetic genres.
2. **Creativity**—consider all of the poet’s “clever moments” and aesthetic intentions.

Does the poem contain anything that is striking, memorable or beautiful?

1. **Climax**—the climax usually manifests itself by such things as greater intensity of tone, an especially significant metaphor, a change in rhythm or a change in person.
2. **Meaning**—taking everything into account, what is the poem’s overall meaning?

What idea about life or experience has the poem articulated? What reflection and/or relevance about the human experience does this poem offer?

**TPFSTT “Types Fast” Analysis**

**Title**

This step requires analyzing pre and post reading:

Pre-reading:

Turn the title into 2 questions. Anyone can add a verb and another noun to turn the title into a question. Instead of seeking the easy answer, challenge yourself to create a higher level question that could possibly lead you to the poem’s overall meaning.

Use the title to create a prediction regarding the poem’s intentions and/or outcome.

Post-analysis:

Re-examine the poem, this time on an interpretive level. What new knowledge have you gained that further explains the title? Was your prediction accurate or totally off?

**Paraphrase**

Paraphrase the literal action within the poem. At this point, resist the urge to jump to interpretation. By paraphrasing the poet’s words you prove comprehension; a failure to understand what happens literally, inevitably leads to an interpretive misunderstanding.

**Figurative Language**

Examine the poem for language that is not used literally. This would include, but not limited to:

* Literary devices- symbolism, metaphor, litotes, allusion, etc.
* Sound devices- alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, rhyme, etc.

**Shifts**

Note shifts in agency and tone. Shifts can be indicated in a number of ways including, but not limited to:

* Setting- time and place
* Shifts in diction- but, yet
* Punctuation- dashes, periods, colons
* Stanza divisions- changes in line or stanza length

Take into consideration anything that indicates that something has changed or a question is being answered.

**Theme**

After establishing the poem’s subject, determine what the poet is saying about each of those subjects. Remember to express the theme as a complete sentence.

**10 Point Analysis**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Literal Scenario |  |
| 2. Agency |  |
| 3. Speech Acts |  |
| 4. Antecedent Scenario |  |
| 5. Inner Structural Division |  |
| 6. Tone |  |
| 7. Outer Structural Forms |  |
| 8. Creativity |  |
| 9. Climax |  |
| 10. Meaning |  |

**TPFSTT “Types Fast” Analysis**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Title  Pre-reading:  Post-analysis: | Q1-  Q2-  Prediction- |
| Paraphrase |  |
| Figurative Language |  |
| Shifts |  |
| Theme |  |